

[Fragments of Folklore]

FOLKLORE

Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

NEW YORK

FORM A

Circumstances of Interview

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER William Wood

ADDRESS 7012-67th Place, Glendale, L. I.

DATE September 20, 1938

SUBJECT FRAGMENTS OF FOLKLORE

1. Date and time of interview
2. Place of interview
3. Name and address of informant MRS. ANNIE NILSSON (AGE 64)
5943 Gates Ave.
Brooklyn, N. Y.
4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant.

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5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you

6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

FOLKLORE

FORM C

NEW YORK

Text of Interview (Unedited)

STATE NEW YORK

NAME OF WORKER WILLIAM WOOD

ADDRESS 7012-67th Place, Glendale, L. I.

DATE September 20, 1938

SUBJECT FRAGMENTS OF FOLKLORE — GATHERED IN BROOKLYN AND PIECED
TOGETHER BY WILLIAM WOOD

THE MONKS' DANCE

This title is a misnomer. To the uninitiated it might well be suggestive of the Terpsechorean revels of some jolly monastic order. Really it was not a dance at all; just the name of a party-game that intrigued the guests at some of those wild and reckless house-gatherings of fifty years ago. Here's the way it was perpetrated:

Two men, acting the role of the "monks", sat on chairs facing each other at a distance of ten feet apart. The "penitent," chosen usually, by virtue of his (or her) lack of sophistication, stood upon a rug running lengthwise between the two chairs; here he was subjected

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to a rigid inquisition. The questions asked were of an intimate and personal nature, and were artfully designed to provoke the side-splitting laughter of the auditors and the embarrassment and confusion of the victim. It is said that there were several variations in the conduct of this engaging pastime, but that it always ended in the same way. At a given signal, two would stoop down and suddenly drag the rug from under the feet of the embattled penitent, sending him sprawling to the floor.

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WHY OPERATE FOR HERNIA?

Mrs. Nilsson tells of an interesting case of bloodless surgery that occurred shortly after the turn of the present century. The method bears no resemblance to that employed by the great Lorenz.

Sunshine, the beautiful child of a resident of Ridgewood, was afflicted with a navel rupture. Her parents were afraid to incur the risk of an operation; so they followed the advice of an old farm-woman who highly recommended the following treatment:

"Taken seven strands of the child's hair; ten small pieces of her finger-nails, one from each digit; and in like manner ten pieces of her toe-nails. Wrap these items together in a small, thin piece of white tissue paper. At midnight, split the bark of a tree with a cleaver, and inset the tiny package in the crevice."

The rupture is said to have disappeared soon after.

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A DEVIL TALE

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One evening in 1900, Mrs. Annie Nilsson took dinner at the home of a spinster friend who lived with her parents in Maspeth. There was no plumbing in the dwelling, and the house-of-convenience was situated in the back yard. During the evening conversation, the head of the family related some stories of his boyhood on a farm; telling of a number of occasions when portions of the land had been plowed up by the Devil, whose hoof marks had been quite perceptible on the mornings following the Evil One's visitations. Rising from her seat, at the conclusion of one of her father's narratives, the spinster daughter excused herself and went into the yard, through the kitchen door. She had no more than closed it behind her when Mrs. Nilsson and the other people assembled heard an unearthly shriek. The father rushed into the yard and carried his daughter, hysterical and fainting, back into the livingroom.

A hasty application of restoratives induced a partial recovery of the woman's composure, and as soon as she was able to talk she declared she had seen the Devil. Describing His Satanic Majesty as a hunchbacked and headless monster, with a yellow ring encircling his neck, she persisted in her story despite the family's suggestions that her experience was merely a hallucination. Falling ill the next day, the woman became progressively worse and died seven months later.

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BURIED "TREASURE:

Not so many years ago, an elderly mechanic lived with his second wife and their son at a house near Gates Avenue and Freshpond Road. His workshop stood in the yard; and when he finished his labors each evening he would place an old iron bed, which he had painted white, against the wooden door of his shop, to keep it closed.

Three of his sons by a former marriage were frequent visitors; and he told them, often, that upon his death they would share with their step-brother such provision as he had been

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able to make for them. This, the old man said, consisted of sums of money, deposited to their credit and in their individual names at banks whose identity he would not then reveal.

Later on, when in failing health, he told his sons that in case of his possible sudden death, they would find the bank-books in a tin box, buried somewhere on the property. Persistently refusing to give any further information, he assured the young men that they would have no difficulty in discovering the place of concealment.

A neighbor died in a house across the street; and the old mechanic went to review the remains and offer his condolences to the bereaved family. He took his departure with the words: "I shall be the next to go, and the time is very close at hand." Within a year he did die, and quite suddenly, during the month of December.

His widow and his four sons made a thorough but futile search of the house, from cellar to attic. They dug into the basement and ransacked the work-shop, all to no avail. The winter was a severe one, with the frost penetrating deep into the ground; so it was agreed to postpone further effort until the coming spring would facilitate a systematic digging of the garden.

A rainy February softened the ground; and the youngest son, impatient to resume the quest for the bank-books, diligently started work with his spade. But his step-brothers, informed of this proceeding, secured a court order enjoining him from continuing until all four could be present to safeguard their respective interests. 5 Spring came at last, and the four men labored with a will, digging deep into every square foot of ground, with no reward for their trouble but calloused hands. Discouraged and disappointed, they prepared to acknowledge defeat. Their dreams of buried "treasure" were fading into thin air. They were ready to ascribe their father's oft-repeated promise to the workings of a deranged mind. There was just one possibility left, one of them suggested: to tear up the floor-boards in the workshop. Then, if the tin box could not be found, the search would be abandoned.

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The boards were quickly removed. At last! There, in the center, was a small space of loose earth! Withing five minutes they had removed their inheritances from the hiding-place, and each brother found his bank-book entitling him to several hundreds of dollars. A not in the tin box, addressed to all, explained the old man's reason for the white painted iron bed. It told of his nocturnal peerings through the window, from which point of vantage he could see-even on the darkest nights—that no prowler was disturbing the sanctity of his strange treasure-house.

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STORES ON WHEELS

Fifty years ago, enterprising merchants of manu varietie's brought their establishments to the very doorsteps of the good wives of Brooklyn, especially in the more sparsely settled districts. This convenience sometimes was offset by a slight additional cost, or a sacrifice of quality-but not always. Competition, even in those days was quite keen; and steady customers were the dealers' most valuable 6 asset, then as now. The short-sighted vendor whose prices or quality of good indicated that was appraising too highly the delivery service given, did not hold his trade very long. He had to go to a new neighborhood and start afresh.

Butchers, grocers, milkmen, clothiers, hatters, shoe merchants and many other types of tradesmen did business in the manner described; they carried their ware to their patrons. Nice, juicy steaks were cut and weighed on the wagon, and transferred to the waiting platters in the consumers' hands. Milk was ladled out of large cans: quarts, pints, and half-pints at a time, and poured into jugs and pitchers and bottles. Grocers weighed out their tea and sugar; their coffee, bacon and lard. Women stood around the vehicles in groups, often exchanging pleasantries with the merchants while the orders were being filled. Mirth-provoking incidents were frequent occurrences. Here is one that was long remembered in the vicinity of Myrtle and Seneca Avenues:

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A woman, having purchases a good-sized bologna from her butcher, found that there was not sufficient money in her purse to pay him. She ran into the house to get the balance, and started back towards the wagon. Before she could reach it, her pet terrier had snatched the sausage- a nice liverwurst-from the kitchen table and deposited it at the butcher's feet.

Old-clothes dealers used to visit the housewives at regular intervals and shrewdly made two transactions at a time, on the basis of exchanging pots and pans and various other kitchen utensil for discarded hats, overcoats, trousers, and what have you?

* * * * * 7 SCOTCH, BUT NOT SCOTS

Residents of the East Williamsburg district in the '80's never accused the Rasmussen family of being remiss in the duty of propogating the species; even though they twitted them for their exaggerated sense of frugality.

Rasmussen's had eleven children, delightfully arranged in stature, like the ascending rungs of a ladder. They were not really poor people. Nor were they stingy; merely careful. It was a good old family custom to keep a lamp burning all night, so that Mrs. Rasmussen could sleep with one eye open for quick attention, when necessary, to the younger members of her numerous progeny. The cost of maintaining this beacon, she reasoned with her spouse, could be offset in part by saving the expense of matches. Lucifers, therefore, were as scarce in the Rasmussen menage as were dentures in the family chicken-coops.

Each morning, with the aid of a scrap of paper, the proud father kindled the kitchen fire from the flame of the lamp. It is said that he kept the unburned portion of the same piece of paper to re-light the wick in the evening. Sometimes, when in the practice of thrift these people tried to save on kerosene, and the lamp was churlish enough to discontinue

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burning before the fire could be lighted, they had to wait until the opening of the grocery store across the road; not to buy matches, but to borrow them.

The family's craving for literary culture was satisfied by the Newtown Register, consistently "borrowed" from the very accommodating merchant who supplied sundry matches. This dealer's appreciation of the Rasmussens' patronage may be imagined by 8 consideration of the following tale:

One Saturday evening, a hearty relative of the large family paid them an unexpected visit; announcing his intention to remain over the week-end. The usual supply of bread always purchased from a baker's wagon-already had been bought; and it was deemed advisable to s end across the street to the grocer and get an extra loaf, so that the household's reputation for hospitality might not suffer. For some strange and unaccountable reason the sojourn of the guest did not involve additional bread consumption, and on the Monday morning the loaf was promptly returned for credit.

The Debevoise family, who owned a farm near what is now Catalpa Avenue, might well have competed with the Rasmussens when it came to applied economy. These people has migrated from Down East. Of all human vices, gluttony was the one they held in most detestation: especially when that evil was discernible among the hired help. Tradition has it that on more than one occasion these advocates of temperate eating supplied a single egg to be divided for breakfast between the woman cook and the one male farm hand who boarded at the house.

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REMOVING WARTS, IN THE GAY NINETIES

First Method:

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Lay a piece of thin, whit cotton around the wart. Tie in a knot. Remove the cotton within five minutes and place it under a stone in the garden. While the fabric is rotting under the stone, the wart will gradually dry up and disappear.

Second Method:

Purchase some Scotch peas at a Jew's store. Hold one of the peas against the wart, pronouncing the three highest names (Father, Son, and Holy Ghost). Take the pea and drop it into a well, which should be near the house. Run back into the dwelling with the greatest possible speed: success depends on reaching the shelter of a roof before the pea sinks to the bottom of the well. If these conditions are faithfully carried out, the wart will be gone in six weeks.

Third Method:

(Doubtless a very efficacious one. W. W.)

Procure a small quantity of the excrement of an unweaned black calf, during the appearance of the new moon. Wrap this matter in a piece of clean, snow-white linen. Apply the compress to the offending protuberance for a few moments each night until the moon wanes. The wart will soon disintegrate.

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A STRANGE BURIAL-CUSTOM

Half a century ago it was not unusual for bereaved parents to decorate the graves of little children with dolls' houses, ornaments, toys, and other inanimate objects that had been dear to them in life. This custom was apparent in a marked degree at the Lutheran Cemetery, in the Ridgewood section of Brooklyn.

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Visitors to this graveyard often paused in wonderment at 10 11 smaller variety. It was not long before the presence of the intruder was discovered, and his company made welcome by an ominous growl. Pleading eyes and suggestive yappings failed to arouse any spirit of hospitality within the possessor of the bone; nor did he display the least inclination to share the dinner that had been thrust upon him. Seemingly disgusted, the small dog left the place of the banquet.

He returned in a few minutes, accompanied by a powerful looking bulldog who at once proceeded to commit mayhem on the unsuspecting diner. With a howl of pain the latter dropped the bone from his mouth, to see it snapped up in an instant by the little dog, who took his departure in triumph with the benefactor whose assistance he had evoked.

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Farmer Zollner had a tough, heavy beard. His young daughter had a gigantic collie dog; a present from her father, and her most prized possession. One winter day the dog had caught a chill, which soon developed into a very bad cold. Medicines were administered, but he failed to respond to treatment.

Mr. Zollner said, "wait till I shave, on Sunday, and I'll bet you I cure him." The daughter waited, wondering what connection her father's weekly shave could have with the dog's promised recovery. On the Sabbath morning the razor went to work; and, as each contingent of hair was removed, the bristles were deposited in the shaving-mug with the soapy water and lather. When this operation was concluded, and the farmer had washed and dried his face, he told his daughter to bring the mug and its contents and follow him to the barn, where the 12 sick dog lay on a warm bed of straw. Without removing the heavy blanket which covered his daughter's pet, Mr. Zollner forced open the animal's mouth and held its jaws apart with a smooth stick telling his little girl to pour the contents of the shaving-mug down the dog's throat. The farmer was a strong man; but the collie although

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sick, was a powerful animal; and it was with some difficulty that he was made to swallow the nasty dose.

The effect was miraculous, Within five minutes the dog had retched up a staggering quantity of foul, poisonous matter. Within a few days, he was well on the way to health.

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FOUR EPITAPHS

In loving memory of two sisters dear;

One's buried in Ireland, the other lies here.

Doctor Schalp has wondrous skill;

Last week, Mr. Jones was ill. Was "Doc" skillful? You decide!

Jones, today, went out to ride.

I, to telling lies averse,

Saw Jones riding in his hearse!

Here lies a lawyer, an excellent liar.

Although he lies cold, he's gone to Hell Fire.

He lied with expertness, whenever he tried,

Till weary of lying, he lay down and died.

Here lies an editor:

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Snooks, if you will.

In mercy, kind Providence,

Let him lie still!

He lied for a living,

He lived while he lied;

And lying no longer,

He lay down and died.

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